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P R E A C H ' D at the
A S S I Z E S

Holden at
BRENTWOOD in *ESSEX*,
MARCH 5th. 1723-4.

By JOHN BRAMSTON, A. M.
Rector of *Theydon-Garnon*, and Chaplain to
the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Lord
NORTH and GREY.

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and the Gentlemen of the GRAND-JURY.

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T O
*J*AMES BRAIN^E, Esq;
High-Sheriff
O F T H E
COUNTY of *ESSEX*,

And to the
Gentlemen of the GRAND-JURY,
V I Z.

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T H E following DISCOURSE, Publish'd
at their Request, is humbly Dedicated by
GENTLEMEN,

*Your most obedient,
and devoted Servant,*
J. BRAMSTON.



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ECCLES. VII. 10.

Say not thou, *what is the Cause that the former Days were ~~not~~ better than these. For thou dost not enquire WISELY concerning This.*

THESE Words may probably at first View, appear as an entire Sentence of themselves, without any Dependance on the Context; but if we consider the foregoing Verse, we may easily guess whence they arise. They seem calculated to check the Disorders of an inquisitive angry Spirit; such a Discontent as grows Inveterate, and sowers into Malice, or, to use the *Preacher's* Phrase, such an Anger as rests in the Bosom of Fools.

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THIS we may gather from some of the Old Translations, where the Words run thus, *Neither say thou*. As if there was a near relation between the angry Spirit there, and the Inquirer here

HOWEVER, be the Connexion what it will, this Crime in the Text is sufficiently obvious without any farther Illustration. Words of this Nature, actuated and enliven'd by a repining Spirit, seldom expire in Breath only, but are commonly the Prologue to approaching Mischiefs.

THE Words of the Text present us with these two Particulars :

First, HERE is a negative Precept, *Say not thou*.

Secondly, THE Reason or Ground on which this Precept is built, *Thou dost not inquire WISELY*.

IN the Precept there is a Restraint given without any Dispensation or Indulgence. No Man living, in a private Capacity, is permitted to wave this Injunction; for though the Expression be singular in a grammatical Sense, though it
looks

looks as if confined to some one individual Person; yet, in a Precept of so great Importance as this is, 'tis equivalent to an universal Command. For instance, *Put off thy Shoes from off thy Feet*, says the Almighty: These Words were immediately directed to MOSES, but not alter an exclusive Manner, as if none but himself were concerned in the Restraint. For outward Reverence upon some signal Exhibition of the *Divine Presence* is a Dictate of Nature; and that Man who defaces such natural Impressions, by any indecent Behaviour, sinks below the Dignity of his Species, and degenerates into flat Brutality.

BUT to return to the Precept before us: The subject Matter of which is not to be too inquisitive after the Times, or to search too nicely into the Causes of publick Management. For Governments being ordered and regulated by Divine Providence, Enquiries of this Kind are nothing less than a presumptive Diving into the Secrets of Heaven.

THE chief Motive that induced the Preacher to press this Doctrine of bridling the Tongue, is founded on the Weak-

ness and Folly of such Inquiries; *Thou dost not enquire Wisely*. This appears in several Particulars:

First, As Men, be; in Cases of this Nature private Persons are frequently apt to err in their Judgment, and mistake the true Cause.

Secondly, THIS Behaviour is Folly in a political Sense, as we are Subjects, it frequently tends to some publick Mischief, and often draws Disciples after it.

And *Lastly*, 'TIS unwise in a mystical Sense, as we are Christians; it being a Transgression of that evangelical Precept which enjoyns us Submission to the Issues of Divine Providence. Not one of these Particulars but comes within the Compass of the Text. To each of them therefore I shall say something.

But *First*, As to the Restraint laid up on the Tongue, *Say not thou*. God has endowed Man with Speech, not only to express his Thoughts, and comment upon them, but as a Character to distinguish him from other Creatures, and sometimes even from himself.

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THUS when his Words deviate from the Rules of Prudence, they distinguish him from the wise Man, when from those of Charity from the good Man ; but if they are of the same Stamp with the Language of the Text, too inquisitive after the Causes of publick Misfortunes, they then distinguish him from both ; for as there is no great Mark of Charity, in impatient Reflections on our Superiours, so there cannot be much Prudence in them.

'Tis Observable, that not only Saying is here restrained ; for in all negative Precepts, 'tis not the bare Act that is forbidden, but any Thing that can add an Aggravation to such an Act. The *Seventh Commandment* does not forbid Uncleanness only, but all Intemperance and Excess, any Thing that inflames the Heart, or gives an edge to our unruly Desires.

THE Heart is the common Storehouse and Nursery of all the Distempers of the Mind. If the Lips breath any fretful Expression, 'tis a shrewd Sign of some irregular Warmth within. *My Heart was hot within me*, says the Psalmist ; and 'tis
true

true in Matters of Revenge, as well as Religion; an impatient Spirit will never be confined, within the narrow Bounds that contain the calm serene Temper.

WORDS are sometimes compared to Wind, and the Proverb has made the Metaphor esteemed just; but they must not always blow where they list, and raise Storms to the Disturbance and Confusion of Civil Society.

GOD and Nature have confin'd one within its proper Bounds, and 'tis the Business of Man to check and suppress the other. 'Tis therefore the Duty of every good Man (tho' he may possibly fancy he has Reason to complain) to smother his Fears and Jealousies in his own Breast, not only with Respect to the *publick Mischief* that may follow, but with Regard to the *private Guilt*; for that Whisper which may be pardonable in private Conversation, may swell to a Crime of a large size, when publickly Proclaimed.

BUT here we may observe, that Caution ought to be had to Person as well as to Place. Some Mens Opinions pass as Oracles, and ought therefore to be
Judiciously

Judiciously considered, before they are reported to the World. *Where there is the Word of a King,* (says SOLOMON) *there is Power*: And inferiour Magistrates being Representatives of *Majesty*, their Words bear some Proportion with that Power from whence they come; they have a strong Influence upon the meaner Sort of Men, and therefore, should be strictly examined, least they make a false Impression.

BUT, suppose there were no Authority, no Power, either Sacred or Civil, yet, the general Behaviour of the common People, the Humour and Disposition of the Populace should make Men cautious what they report.

AND here we may take notice by the way, that 'tis not only, *Say not thou*; that is restrained in the Text, but the Precept reaches still farther, *Say not thou what is the Cause*. This is generally so Secret and Abstruse, as not to be discover'd, by the shallow Conjectures of each particular *inquisitive Person*. Many there are, who love to start the same Question the Disciples did of Old, *Whether did this Man sin or his Parents?* They cannot see
any

any Calamity or Misfortune, but they immediately Comment upon it, and point it out as an exprefs Character of Divine Vengeance: Nay, sometimes they scruple not to confine the Judgments of G O D to real Virtues, to Things which we are bound to do, as if G O D had resolved to punish what he exprefly commands.

BUT fuch Men would do well to confider, that when the Almighty afflicted J O B, in his Relations and Perfon, he at the fame Time pronounced him a Man not to be matched for Integrity and Juftice: If there was any Sin, it was in thofe who were fo free as to censure, not in him who fo patiently fuffer'd.

AFFLICTIONS are not always Punifhments, for tho' they refemble one another in their outward Shape and Drefs; yet as to their Effentials in a moral Sente there is a wide Difference. *e. g.* It was not any Punifhment from Heaven that fent LAZARUS to the Grave, but only a defign to difplay the Power of the Son of G O D. In fhort, 'tis certain that G O D has fuch a tender Regard to his Mercy, that he defires not fo much to Punifh as to Preferve: And would Men engage
their

their Thoughts in so pleasing Inquiries, they might spend whole Years in searching for the *Cause*, and never incur the *Censure* in the Text.

WHAT is meant by the word *Days* in the Text, is not here to be construed of Time, as Time; for they are in that Sense the same they were many Ages ago, they have still the same Author, who in the Beginning pronounced them good: Besides, that which measures the Life of Man, and Series of his Actions, is free from any Blemish; 'tis the Men and their Conduct which defame the *Days*, not any Imperfection in the Revolutions of the *Heavens*. And as the *Days* are liable to Scandal and Disgrace, from the Errors of Men; so are they capable of being made famous from their virtuous Carriage and Demeanour; and (as the *Psalmist* observes) *He that would fain see good Days, must seek Peace and ensue it.*

I shall not compare the present with former Ages, because such Comparisons are not always pleasing; I shall only observe in general, that no civil Sanction was ever intended so far to restrain the *Pulpit*, as to leave no room for *charitable* Admonitions.

nitions. Let us therefore take a short and serious View of the happy Privileges of this Kingdom.

THE Law is the *Birth-right* of every *Englishman*, an Inheritance entailed upon him, which he cannot be deprived of but by *Violence* and *Hostility*. Certainly, it can be no small Blessing to have this *Birth-right*, this Inheritance secured; to have those pure unspotted Sanctions preserved from such *Rapes*, as are commonly committed by the Sword. Sure no greater temporal Good can be bestowed upon a People, than to have *Justice* (to speak in the Language of the Prophet) *run down like Waters, and Righteousness like a mighty Stream*, and these distributed by *Wisdom* and *Impartiality*. I should not interrupt these pleasing Reflections, with the least Hint at the melancholy Divisions amongst us, did it not at the same time give us an Opportunity of observing, with what an indifferent Eye the *Law* looks upon all Men; not so much as a distinctive Name is permitted in any *Court of Justice*, least the Law should seem to countenance former Disputes or raise new Quarrels.

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THIS *Law* then may be said to be a Ray of that eternal Reason and Justice, which dwells in the *most High*; and as it derives its Being from him, to it may be adorned with one of his Titles; 'tis *no Respector of Persons*, but *renders to every Man his due, Tribute to whom Tribute, Custom to whom Custom*. Prince and People both have their Preservation from hence; or as St. PAUL says of Charity, that *'tis the Bond of perfectness*; so may be said of the Law, 'tis the common Soul that unites us all into one Body, and gives a kind of political Existence; For by this *we live, move, and have our Being*, in a *legal Sense*. And had we no other Blessing but this, it were enough to commend the *Days*.

BUT there is something still behind of greater Moment. The solemn *Service and Worship* of GOD, is a matter of higher Concern than that which preserves our Bodies and Estates; for by the Law we are United into one Body, by this into one Soul; by the one we are United to Men, by the other to GOD: In the first, we are assisted by Persons of the like Passions, and Infirmities with our ourselves;

in the other, our Assistance is from Powers, not subject to any frail confused Distempers of the Flesh, but of Divine Dispositions. Whilst Men enjoy such Privileges as these, shall they quarrel with what God has bestowed upon them, not only as their present, but as an earnest of their future Happiness?

IF therefore there be any thing desirable in a quiet and peaceable Life; if any Thing good in the *free Dispensation* of Justice; if any Advantage in the publick Service and Worship of God, which is so nearly allyed to the Life of Glory; what cause can be found to vilify the present *Times* when brought into Competition with former *Ages*, I leave every cool *impartial Reasoner* to determine: That there are numbers of vicious Men in the World cannot be denied, such as engage in rude and dissolute Practices; but when was it, or will it be otherwise, till it shall please God to remove from us this Body of *Sin*. But whenever this Objection is raised against *any Age*, Men would do well to consider, that there are Sins of the *Spirit*, as well as the

the *Flesh*, that a Man may burn with *Malice*, as well as with *Lust*.

FOR though carnal Sins expose us to greater Disgrace, because they are more visible to the World, and are not capable of any religious Shape; yet, spiritual Sins bear so near a relation to the Soul, that they make us liable to more *Hypocrisie* and *Deceit*: He that spends his *Days* in riot and excess, may waste his Substance, and destroy his Health; but he that employs his Time in uncharitable Censures, whose Life is a Scene of Faction and Sedition, strikes immediately at the publick Weal.

AND now I shall finish this Discourse, with some practical Considerations on the last Part of the Text; *For thou doest not enquire Wisely concerning this.*

THE Folly of this inquisitive Behaviour (as I observed before) consists in these three Particulars: 'Tis Unwise as we are *Men*, *Subjects*, and *Christians*.
1st. *As we are Men*: He that is said to walk upon the Wings of the Wind, and force his Passage through the Deep, leaves no Impressions behind him.

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THE Judgments of the Almighty are generally wrote in dark, obscure Characters, nothing less than an inspired Spirit can interpret them; we may, nay, must be acquainted with GOD's Commands, but never are with his Designs: *For what Man is he that can know the Council of GOD? or who can think what the Will of the LORD is? 'Tis not for you,* says our Saviour to his Disciples, *to know Times and Seasons;* nor is it for us to enquire into the Causes of the Conduct of this World: CHRIST gives a check to one, and SOLOMON to the other.

SUPPOSE, its Sin, which always moves GOD to draw the Sword of Justice, yet 'tis not in the Power of mortal Man to distinguish what that Sin is. Sometimes he strikes for a *publick Good*. History informs us of the Primitive Martyrs led to the Stake, not for any Imperfections of their own, (tho' Imperfect they were, had GOD been extream to mark what was done amiss) but for the Tryal of their Faith, and the Manifestation of GOD's Glory. Sometimes he strikes for a private Good, as when he takes sight from the Body, and enlightens the Soul. And sometimes

sometimes he does it, to display his Power and Dominion.

THE whole World is nothing else but a Donative from *Heaven*, or rather a continual Gift; and as GOD will not de-vest himself of his right of Bestowing, so neither does he confine himself to any limits or periods in Granting. He may suspend his Bounty when he pleases, without any Reflection on the Crimes of Men. The hurry of a *rash Temper* may prompt Men to judge in such Cases, but all their Knowledge can never teach them how to determine.

AGAIN, There is no Wisdom in such inquiries as we are Subjects: For, when once Men wholly dedicate themselves to enquire into the *Causes* of publick Management; 'tis very much to be suspected that they shew little regard to Affairs at home; 'tis the ready way to break into Faction and Party: *Ephraim* against *Manasses*, *Manasses* against *Ephraim*, and both against *Judah*, till all are inflamed.

UNHAPPY Experience tells this so plain, that it saves me any farther Addition on this Head: I shall therefore only Remark, that

that this strict searching after Causes, mentioned in the Text, may increase Mens Malice, but can never alleviate any of their Miseries. *Lastly* then,

THERE is no Wisdom in this Practice as we are Christians, except it be wise to quarrel with *Divine Providence*, idly thinking, that the Government of the **World** wants to be reformed by us. A manifest Truth it is, that Men are apt to play the Critick upon any publick Miscarriage, and to judge all Sorts of Men, but those whom God has commanded them to judge, I mean themselves. 'Tis nothing new to observe, that Men of the lowest Rank and meanest Education, such as converse with little else but that Earth from whence they spring, soar aloft in their Censures, and pass decisive Sentences upon those Persons whose Names, (according to the Rules of common Decency) they ought never to mention, but with Respect and Reverence.

THUS if they are not fed with Manna from Heaven, they presently Commence a Quarrel against MOSES and AARON. If publick Credit seems to languish or decay

decay, there is soon discover'd some Imposition either *Ecclesiastical* or *Civil*, to lay the blame upon.

AND as long as Men are thus wedded to their *Interest*, the Question in the Text will never be out of date. The most unlearn't of the Vulgar will be talking of Causes, as if they were able to explain all the various Appearances of *Providence* in the World.

BUT had Men so much *Grace* as to turn their Inquiries a little nearer home, there is a certain piece of *Heraldry* in Religion, would teach them the proper Parent of all their Sorrows: Every Man has something in his own Breast, that would cool the Heat of his censorious Humour; for Sin is not only inseparably United to our very Being, but there is also a crowd of unruly Actions, its constant Attendants, which fully determine the Question before us, and puts an end to this Controversy.

FOR Men therefore to forge Mischiefs and invent Causes, when the whole Stream of Affairs might run in a peaceable Channel,

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nel, can never be reconciled either to Reason or Religion. And now I have done with the Text, and the inquisitive Person in it.

I shall conclude the Whole with a short Reflection,

WOULD Men incorporate Religion with their civil Employments, and byass the Affairs of this Life with some Considerations on that which is to come; would they follow the apostolical Rule, *Let all Things be done without Murmurings and Disputing*; or, to come a little closer to the Text and the Times, had they but so much *Humility*, as to think their *Governours* wiser than themselves; or so much *Charity* as not to suspect they would impose on them any Thing, but what was good and honest; then might we look upon the *Days*, not as they are in themselves, the Measure of our *natural Lives*, but as a Preface to *Future* rity.

THUS should we give no Occasions for fresh *Uneasiness*, but resign ourselves wholly

wholly up to the Decrees and Sanctions
of G O D and Man. Thus should we
establish a secure *Peace* here, and gain at
last that *Peace* which this World cannot
give.

F I N I S.





